

Engaged At Cabin Creek: The First Kansas Colored Infantry's First Action  
of the American Civil War

“Wherever [B]lack regiments were engaged in battle during the Civil War, they acquitted themselves in a manner which fully justified the policy of the Government in enlisting their services” (p. 52, Fox’s *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War*, 1889).

This quote aptly describes the First Kansas Colored Infantry of the United States Army in the American Civil War. Their story involves loss, sacrifice, and tragedy and serves as a microcosm of the American experience of the Civil War. The regiment started as an unapproved presidential experiment as Kansas Senator James Lane started efforts to recruit fugitive slaves, free African-Americans, and slaves who had been “liberated” by marauding Jayhawkers into Missouri in 1862. Liberated being the operative term as they were often coerced into the regiment once brought across the state boundary.

The First Kansas Colored was part of the “Army of the Frontier” under the gruff General James Blunt. Blunt was a fierce abolitionist who along with Lane broke numerous protocols and caused numerous worries for President Lincoln in his forming of the Black regiment. In direct charge of the regiment was Colonel James Williams, a military officer who insisted this regiment would be battle worthy. He drilled, advocated, and fought numerous political battles to make the regiment an effective detachment of the Union army. The unit formed in the summer of 1862, but was not mustered into the service until February 13, 1863. It would be that spring when the regiment would see its first action and be tested under fire in a series of engagements that would radically change the American Civil War.

During that spring, the unit was operating from Baxter Springs, Kansas. Williams commanded the brigade containing the First Kansas Colored and was instructed to escort a wagon train to re-supply strategic Fort Gibson in the Indian Territory north of modern day Muskogee, Oklahoma. The brigade also contained the Third Regiment of the Indian Home Guards as well as the Second Colorado Infantry and three companies of cavalry. They departed from their fortified position in Kansas on June 26, 1863, and proceeded through the Indian Territory until meeting an entrenched Confederate force at the ford of Cabin Creek on July 1.

It was here Williams made a monumental decision. The Rebels knew the supply train was vital for the Union Army to maintain its presence in the frontier theater of the war. To counter this, they had sent a 2200 man force to stop the supply train, which was protected by a Union force numbering about 900. The decision was made to attack the position on July 2 to clear a way for the supply train. An initial cannonade did little to soften the position, which struck hard at the first line of the Union attack led by the Indian Home Guard. After their repulse, Williams sent in the First Kansas Colored, which coolly formed line across the creek from the dug-in pits of the Confederate defenders.

While forming under cover of artillery and some 20 minutes of firing, the regiment advanced across the creek “wading to their arm-pits in water” and drove the defenders from their strong positions to a second line some 400 yards distant of the creek. The cavalry companies were then called to push the issue. The subsequent charge broke the enemy and scattered them across the prairie.

Williams complimented the “chivalrous and soldierly conduct of the entire command” in particular the “forming in the face of the enemy, with as much ease and little confusion as if upon parade.” The train reached its destination without further incident on July 5. The regiment

would go on to serve with distinction throughout the rest of the war. Being rechristened the 79<sup>th</sup> US Colored Infantry, the unit would fight and die at Poison Springs, Arkansas, Sherwood, Missouri, Honey Springs in the Indian Territory, and Flat Rock in the Indian Territory. In its over two years of existence, the regiment suffered 166 dead resulting from combat and another 165 from disease. The regiment was mustered out of the service on October 1, 1865.

Those who may have doubted the ability of the regiment were quickly dissuaded of their beliefs by watching the men or hearing of their ability in combat. A reporter for the *Leavenworth Conservative* commented:

“It is useless to talk any more about negro courage...The men fought like tigers, each and every one of them, and the main difficulty was to hold them well in hand....”

Further testament to their courage and bravery came from General Blunt who, after seeing them in action, stated:

“The soldiers fought like veterans, with a coolness and valor that were unsurpassed...in the hottest of the fight, they never once faltered. Too much praise cannot be awarded for their gallantry.”

The First Kansas Colored set many firsts in this proud moment of history: it was the first Black unit to see actual combat in the Civil War; the first to serve alongside Whites; and the first to suffer combat fatalities. Additionally, the regiment, along with the Second Kansas Colored Infantry, served with great distinction in the western and frontier theaters of the American Civil War gallantly fighting prejudice and discrimination, in addition to fighting for the end of slavery.

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